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ABSTRACT

This discussion of agenda setting reviews early theories of mass communication and traces the beginnings of agenda setting theory to the 1968 United States presidential campaign, during which researchers found a high correlation between what the media were saying about issues and what the people thought were important issues. The results of more recent agenda setting studies are summarized, and the report concludes that the concept can be broadened in scope and perspective to include influence on cultural values, sexual norms, and attitudes toward work and leisure time, as well as on public opinion toward local and national issues. (AEA)

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THE ROLE OF THE MASS MEDIA IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION

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I have been given the task of exploring the influence of the mass media on public opinion. What I plan to do is explore with you a relatively new area of research in mass communications: the agenda setting function of the mass media. Before we proceed, however, I would like to retrace for you some basic principles underlying several related theories of mass communication. One, known as the diffusion theory, focuses on the spread of information through a social structure. Another looks at the role of the "gatekeepers" in the dissemination of news. An understanding of these traditions in mass communication research will help to provide a better understanding of the fundamentals of the agenda setting research as it relates to the role and function of the media in shaping public opinion.

Early theories of mass communication, labeled as the instinctive S-R theory, or the "hypodermic needle theory" were formulated during the propaganda years of the First World War.[1] The media were seen as powerful devices which could alter the behavior and attitudes of the mass audience. Propaganda used during the war appeared to be very effective. The reason for its effectiveness was that everyone, it was believed, responded to the messages the same way. The stimulus-response theory was based on the idea that the media stimuli

> tapped inner urges, emotions or other processes over which the individual had little voluntary control. Because of the inherited nature of these mechanisms, each person responded more or less uniformly. . . . The result was that members of the mass could be swayed and influenced by those in possession of the media especially with the use of emotional appeals.[2]

The media were seen as all-powerful; capable of impressing new ideas upon defenseless andimpressionable minds. Public opinion could easily be swayed by

a few emotional appeals in the media. Everyone would respond to the messages in the same way. Interaction among members of the mass audience was not considered a significant factor.

The major turning point from this position came with the results of a classic study conducted by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet.[3] These researchers were interested in looking at the decision-making process used by a group of voters in Erie County, Ohio during the 1940 presidential campaign, and wanted to discover what process was being used to decide for whom the voters would cast their ballots. They found, to their amazement, that the mass media had far less effect on voting behavior than they had hypothesized. First of all, most people had already decided how to vote prior to the campaign; and secondly, those who did change their mind during the campaign were influenced not by the media, but by other people, such as their family, friends or co-workers.[4]

These findings led them to further explorations. The researchers began to look at "the role of informal contacts with other people as an important set of variables in determing the effects of the media."[5] They discovered that many people got their information about the campaign not from the media, itself, but instead from other people who had heard or read information directly from the media. The theory development of how information is disseminated has become known as the two-step flow, whereby information from the media is attended to by well-informed individuals who then pass on the information to others. These media consumers are labeled "opinion leaders," because of their role in disseminating information and in shaping others' opinions, since they were not only passing along information, but were also interpreting that information for others. The end result of this study, as stated by DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, is "the recognition that informal social relationships play a significant part in modifying the manner in which

given individuals will act upon a message that comes to their attention via the mass media."[6]

By the early fifties, a different type of research was being conducted. This time not on the media audiences, but on those influential in determining the messages which are either printed in newspapers or broadcast on radio and television news programs. These studies have become known as the "gatekeeper studies,"[7] Studies of wire editors and news editors have shown that many news decisions are based on either subjective evaluations or often times on "some unwritten code or criteria resulting in many similar decisions regardless of the medium being analyzed."[8] Gatekeeper studies examine "the behavior of those persons who at various points control the fate of news stories."[9] A question media consumers should be asking is: why do some stories get front page coverage, while others are buried inside, and some never printed at all? Although this question is not central to the focus here, I raise it because such questions help us to understand the complexity of the news business, and because these are necessary decisions made by various news gatekeepers--men and women who determine which stories to print and which to toss in the trash can. Our perception of the "real world" is affected by the decisions made by the various news gatekeepers.

This leads us to a larger question about the role of the media in society, and in particular, the role of the news media in shaping public opinion. I would like to explore with you one recognized function of the news media which has been labeled the "agenda setting function."

Bernard Cohen summarized the agenda setting function with this statement: "(The press) may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about."[10] Even earlier than Cohen's statement is one from Robert Park, who

wrote that "the newspaper has taken over the job of the town gossip."[11] In speaking on the influence of the mass media on public opinion, Ithea de Sola Pool said very much the same thing when he wrote:

> The power of the media to persuade, at least when there is democratic controversy, is very much less than is usually assumed, but their power to inform is enormous. . . . In the modern world, all of us depend upon the mass media for much of the large stock of facts and images which we need to deal with the complexities of life. But what we do with that information is something the media do not control.[12]

Eugene Shaw views the media "as great socialization institutions that provide their audience with a commonality of topics to interact about in a heterogeneous, utilitarian, impersonal, segmented environment-- that is, in the modern world."[13] In other words, the media provide us with topics for conversation, as well as information of world events, national affairs, and local civic concerns. This information helps us understand what is going on across the country and around the world. For most of us, the news is our only contact with events which we cannot experience personally.

Most studies testing the agenda-setting theory have used political information and campaigns as their stimuli. One of the earliest studies investigating the agenda setting function was conducted by McCombs and Shaw.[14] Working with the 1968 presidential campaign, the study matched what Chapel Hill voters said were the key issues of the campaign with the actual content of the mass media used during the campaign. Respondents were randomly selected from lists of registered voters in five precincts. A filter question was used during the initial interviews to select 100 respondents who had not yet decided how to vote. The idea being that these individuals would be more open and susceptible to campaign information from the media. They asked these respondents to outline the key issues as they saw them, regardless of what the presidential candidates might be saying at the moment. At the same time, a content analysis of the mass media serving the voters was conducted. This included four local newspapers as well as the New York

Times, Time, Newsweek and two national evening news broadcasts serving the market. They were looking for the key issues as presented in the news as well as other campaign information.

The researchers found a very high correlation (.967) between what the media were saying about issues, and what the people thought were important issues. Although the three presidential candidates (Nixon, Humphry, Wallace) placed different amounts of emphases upon different issues, the respondents reflected a composite of the mass media coverage of the three candidates. The voters attended reasonably well to all the news, regardless of which candidate or party issue was stressed.

In summation of the study, McCombs and Shaw state that "voters tend to share the media's composite definition of what is important," and that this "strongly suggests an agenda-setting function of the mass media."[15]

There were any number of consequential variables which were not included in this original study. The researchers themselves recognize the limitations of the study in this statement: "subsequent research must move from a broad societal level to the social-psychological level, matching individual attitudes with individual use of the mass media."[16] The research design used in McComb and Shaw's study is representative of subsequent research carried out in later studies on political campaigns.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the agenda-setting function of the media since McCombs and Shaw published their study. Some have looked at agenda-setting function during election years. Others, trying to broaden the scope of agenda-setting theory, have looked at the agenda-setting function during non-election years. Some studies have looked at agendas set by newspapers only, some at television only, and others at both. Some studies found signficant results, others did not. I would like to review for you some of the more recent agenda-setting studies which reflect a variety of questions, and a variety of results.

Atwell, Sohn and Sohn[17] looked at whether or not newspapers set the agenda for community discussions during a non-election year. Their sample was 150 residents of a small Southern Illinois city. Significant correlations were found between the content of the local daily newspaper and what people in the community reported reading and talking about. The researchers suggest that their study indicates that there exists something they call a "community discussion," and that the discussion was influenced by the content of the local newspaper.

A similar study by Sohn[18] found no support for the idea that the local newspaper was effective in setting a reading agenda, and "only limited support to the assertion that the local newspaper is effective in setting the local talking agenda for respondents.[19] Her study suggests that "what is talked about may prompt reading of the newspaper.[20] She provides two interpretations of the results. One is that after people talk about a topic, they may seek out more information about that topic by reading about it in the newspaper. The other interpretation is that after talking about a topic, people may just become "aware" of the topic, which will cause them to notice an article in the paper as they scan the pages, and end up reading the article. She is making a clear distinction between conscious and accidental information seeking behavior.

Williams and Larsen[21] looked at the agenda-setting function of the press during an off-election year also. They asked respondents in central Illinois to list those issues, both local and national, they thought were important. Media serving the community were analyzed for content and the person and media agendas were compared. The results indicate that for local issues, the media do serve an agenda-setting function, but not so when looking at national issues. For both local and national issues, the local newspaper

correlated the highest of the media with the personal agendas. The researchers state that this is not surprising in view of previous research which found the print media better able to set agendas than the electronic media. However, they also found that the local cablecast news program had an effect on local and personal agendas. Of interest, was their finding that those who were frequent viewers of both the ABC and NBC nightly news programs had personal agendas more comparable to the respective news programs than the agenda for the aggregate sample. The implication of this is that the electronic news media can also be effective in setting personal agendas for those who are faithful viewers of a given national newscast.

Palmgreen and Clarke[22] also looked at the agenda-setting function of the media for both local and national issues. Their study found that network television was more influential in setting personal agendas when treating national issues than was the local newspaper. When assessing local issues, they found that the local newspaper exerted the strongest influence on respondents' agendas for local issues. The researchers recognize the discrepancy between their findings and other studies which found newspapers superior to television in setting national issues agendas. One explanation offered for this difference is that their study was conducted during a non-campaign setting. They cite McClure and Patterson's study of the 1972 presidential campaign which found that national television news gave more doverage to campaign activities than to issues. So those who studied the agenda-setting function of national television news during campaign years were working with television news programs lacking in an issues oriented approach to the news. The researchers suggest that in a non-campaign setting, broadcast journalists "appear to devote more attention to the substantive issues of the day."[23]

Shaw[24] looked at the differences between intra- and interpersonal

agendas in a panel survey conducted in North Carolina during a political campaign. He asked the sample to specify the frequency of political discussions with others, the role they take in those discussions, and the people with whom they usually discuss politics--whether co-workers, friends or family members. As the election drew near, voters' increased interest in the campaign was joined by a greater use of the media for political news. This was due primarily to an increased use of television for political information. Newspapers, however had been used more heavily for political news during the early part of the campaign. Those who played an active advocacy role in discussions maintained a greater reliance on print rather than television news for political information, "suggesting that print was valued by such discussants for supplying them more detail on which to base their arguments."[25] Shaw found low correlations between personal and media agendas, which he explained were due to the fact that the respondents gave the "drug issue" high priority. The drug issue, however, ranked low on the newspaper's agenda during the monitored period. By deleting the drug issue from the list of ranked issues, the correlations of the voters' agendas with the newspaper's ranged between .80 to .90. Shaw believes that his study supports the hypothesis that "the more frequent and more active is one's articipation in interpersonal networks, the closer is the agreement between one's personal agenda and that of the media."[26] The rationale for his position is as follows. The need for news orientation leads to heavy media use. The need for orientation is a need for information which has social value in an interpersonal context. That is, in order for one to have something to say or add to a particular discussion, one turns to the media for information. Shaw also postulates that the opposite prediction is just as tenable. Instead of looking at the media for an understanding of what is important, one could take his cues from other people instead. In other words, interpersonal discussions can provide an alternative means for gathering

information about local,national and world events. This interpretation is congruous with the one cited by Sohn earlier in this paper (see page 6).

Shaw believes that research is still lacking which can clearly state whether this interpersonal factor is to be seen as social utility--that is, anticipating a discussion-- or as a reinforcing factor of the group setting. In either case, the interpersonal factor is an important variable to consider in order to specify "the conditions under which the agenda-setting behavior of the mass media influences an individual's own agenda of issues."[27] In fact, both types--anticipated and actual discussions--may be involved in the process.

There is a theory in communication research which indicates that those who know they will be active communicators process information differently than those who do not expect to make any further use of that information.[28] Research has indicated that "future transmitters" are able to "organize and unify the received information better and could produce upon request not only more details but more varied details."[29] Psychologists have concluded that "transmitters activate cognitive structures that are more differentiated, complex, unified, and organized than are those of the mere receivers of information."[30] Therefore, if one recognizes that the information being received will be used at some later date, such as during a discussion, then that person is more likely to remember the information than is one who sees no future utility for that information. In other words, we attend to messages differently depending upon whether they are for private or public utility.

Implicitely stated in this discussion of the agenda-setting function is a functional approach to an understanding of the role of the media in society. In other words: how is an individual using the media instead of what is the media doing to the individual? Katz, Gurevitch and Haas state that the functional approach "argues that people bend the media to their needs

more readily than the media overpower them; that the media are at least as much agents of diversion and entertainment as of information and influence.[31] They go on to state, in agreeing with Shaw, that the media we select and the content therein, and the use of that information "are considerably influenced by social roles and psychological predispositions."[32] This approach follows the tradition of communication research which says people select materials from the media which will satisfy a particular need at a given time. This theory is congruent with Shaw's interpretation of his study which distinguishes between those who know they will be future transmitters of information versus those who know the information they are reading has no future social utility. That is, we pick up the newspaper to read not only because of the possible social utility of that information, but also, perhaps, because we need to relax and forget about the day at the office, or we simply want to forget about that pile of dirty dishes waiting for us in the sink.

The agenda-setting theory of mass communication has its roots in the tradition of functional research. With agenda-setting theory, we are looking at one specific function of the media: how it is used to set one's own personal or interpersonal agendas. Shaw recognizes that functional studies have laid the initial focus of agenda-setting theory on people's needs.[33] He contends that agenda setting research must look beyond a study of the need for information, since that is only one type of human need. Agenda-setting research, he states, must "be extended beyond the news content of the media. Agenda setting effects resulting from people's habitual exposure to other media fare must also be explored, and not only during a political campaign.[34]

The basic claim of agenda-setting theory is that our understanding of much of what goes on in the world is copied from the media. The emphasis has been placed on news items, as well as local and/or national issues found within the hard news copy and editorial columns of newspapers and news broadcasts.

What about the role of the media in setting agendas on other aspects of our life--such as our cultural values, our sexual norms, our attitudes towards work and use of leisure time. It appears as if the agenda-setting concept can be broadened in scope and perspective beyond what has been assumed.

Agenda setting theory states that the media are able to attach levels of meaning and importance to various issues by the type of coverage provided, and simply by the inclusion or exclusion of given news items. I think of equal importance to this discussion of media agendas, are those long-range issues which are not covered by the media, or which were covered at one time when they were popular, but now have slipped out of the public's view because we are tired of hearing about them. Many issues which greatly affect our life lack the visual interest or easily recognizable conflict to be given airtime on broadcast news programs. They do not qualify as being "newsworthy." Is "out of sight, out of mind?" Who is to say which questions are worth asking, and which merit space in the newspapers and news broadcasts? How does the absence of these issues affect our interpersonal discussions and our personal agendas?

We are talking today about the dissemination of information to members of a society. Difussion studies, gatekeeper studies, agenda-setting theory and functional studies are looking at the same broad questions from different perspectives. All, however, are concerned with acquiring a better understanding of the influence of the media on pulic opinion.

I would like to conclude this presentation with a quotation from a book by Schumacker called Small is Beautiful: Economics as If People Mattered. I believe she is speaking about agenda-setting within a very large framework:

> The way in which we experience and interpret the world obviously depends very much indeed on the kind of ideas that fill our minds. If they are mainly small, weak, superficial, and incoherent, life will appear insipid, uninteresting, petty, and chaotic. . . . The vacuum of our minds may only too easily be filled by some big fantastic notion--political or otherwise--which suddenly seems to illumine everything and to give meaning and purpose to our existence. It needs no emphasis that herein lies one of the great dangers of our times.[35]

NOTES

1. Melvin DeFleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach, Theories of Mass Communication, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 1975), p. 158.

2. Ibid., p. 159.

3. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, The People's Choice. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948).

4. Elihu Katz, "The Diffusion of New Ideas and Practices," In The Science of Human Communication, ed. by Wilbur Schramm, (New York: Basic Books, 1963), p. 80.

5. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, op. cit., p. 211.

6. Ibid.

7. See David Manning White, "The 'Gatekeeper': A Case Study in the Selection of News," Journalism Quarterly, 27 (1950), 383-390. Also see Walter Gieber, "News is What Newspaper Men Make It," in People, Society, and Mass Communications, ed. by Lewis A. Dexter and David Manning White, (New York: The Free Press, 1964), 173-182.

8. Wenmouth Williams, Jr., "The Agenda Setting Function of Newspapers and Public Radio: An Analysis of the Intrapersonal Method." (Paper presented to the Speech Communication Association Convention, Houston, Texas, 1975), p. 1.

9. Gieber, op. cit., p. 174.

10. Bernard C. Cohen, The Press and Foreign Policy, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 13. Quoted in Williams, op. cit., p. 1-2.

11. Robert Park, The City, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925). Quoted in L. Erwin Atwood, Ardyth B. Sohn, and Harold Sohn, "Daily Newspaper Contributions to Community Discussion," Journalism Quarterly, 55 (Autumn, 1978), 570.

12. Ithiel de Sola Pool, "The Effect of Communication on Voting Behavior," in The Science of Human Communication, ed. by Wilbur Schramm, (new York: Basic Books, 1963), p. 136.

13. Eugene F. Shaw, "The Agenda Setting Hypothesis Reconsidered: Interpersonal Factors," Gazette, 23 (1977), 230-231.

14. Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," Public Opinion Quarterly, 36 (1972), 176-187.

15. Ibid., p. 185.

16. Ibid.

17. Atwood, Sohn and Sohn, op. cit., 570-576.

18. Ardyth B. Sohn, "A Longitudinal Analysis of Local Non-Political Agenda-Setting Effects," Journalism Quarterly, 55 (Summer, 1978), 325-333.

19. Ibid., p. 333.

20. Ibid.

21. Wenmouth Williams Jr. and David C. Larsen, "Agenda Setting in an Off-Election Year," Journalism Quarterly, 54 (1977), 744-749.

22. Phillip Palmgreen and Peter Clarke, "Agenda Setting with Local and National Issues," Communication Research, 4 (1977), 435-452.

23. Ibid., p. 446.

24. Shaw, op. cit., 230-240.

25. Ibid., 233.

26. Ibid., 236.

27. Ibid.

28. Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen, Belief, Attitude, Intention and Behavior: An Introduction to Theory and Research, (Redding, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1975).

29. Shaw, op. cit., 238.

30. Robert B. Zajonc, "Process of Cognitive Tuning in Communication," Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 61 (1960) 159-167. Referred to in Shaw, op. cit., 238.

31. Elihu Katz, Michael Gurevitch and Hadassah Haas, "On the Use of the Mass Media for Important Things," American Sociological Review, 39 (April, 1973), 164-165.

32. Ibid.

33. Eugene F. Shaw, "Agenda Setting and Mass Communication Theory," Gazette, 25 (1979), 99.

34. Ibid.

35. E. F. Schumacker, Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered, (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 84.